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A Taste of the Holy Life

An Account of an International Ordination in Myanmar

Susan Elbaum Jootla



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A Taste of the Holy Life

“E

hi bhikkhu!” “Come, monk!” With these simple but portentous words, the Buddha founded the Sangha, the Order of bhikkhus, which has preserved and practised his doctrine from that day to this.

With that “*Ehi bhikkhu!*” the Buddha conferred ordination upon the first monk, the Venerable Kondañña, at Isipatana near Benares. At the conclusion of the Buddha’s first discourse, Kondañña had asked to be ordained, and the Buddha, simply by calling him a bhikkhu, transformed him into one. The Buddha went on to say: “The Dhamma has been well expounded. Practise the holy life rightly to make an end of suffering.” That was the ultimate, the highest aim of becoming a monk then as it is now: liberation from all *dukkha*, the suffering of repeated becoming in the cycle of rebirth, *saṃsāra*.

During the Buddha’s life, and since, the procedure to become a Buddhist monk evolved into a series of steps often involving large numbers of bhikkhus and lay people. Modern ordination ceremonies clearly express the interdependent relationship of monks and lay people supporting each other in their efforts to put

an end to suffering. The bhikkhus, by their conduct, must inspire faith in the lay people. The householders in turn show deep respect for the Order by honouring the individual bhikkhus who in turn determine to make themselves worthy of the respect and support they receive from the laity.

The Buddha could only ordain a few bhikkhus with the phrase “*Ehi bhikkhu.*” Such instantaneous ordination required that the man had cultivated certain *pāramīs* (perfections, good qualities) in the past. Chief amongst the good kammās needed for the Buddha to accept someone as a monk in this way, tradition says, was having been a bhikkhu in previous lives and/or having helped others to ordain. This is one of the reasons why laymen in Myanmar ordain temporarily, and why they obtain such lavish help from lay people, notably their families, when they undertake temporary ordination.

Because they are closely based on the Vinaya Piṭaka, the ordination ceremonies in the different Theravada countries are almost identical. Whether the bhikkhus expect to remain in robes for the remainder of their lives or are ‘temporary’ monks (a common practice in Myanmar and Thailand) makes no difference to the procedure. But national variations, especially in the lay aspects of the events, do lend colour and specific points of interest to the solemn ceremony.

In January 1994 a mass ordination of foreign men was held in Yangon, Myanmar (the former Rangoon, Burma) under the combined auspices of the Myanmar Department of Religious Affairs and the International Meditation Centre, Yangon. This event, unusual in its location, scale, and international scope, will be described below along with a summary of the week these men were in robes.

All the detailed arrangements of place, transport, requisites, and the like had been made by the hosts beforehand for seven boys aged 9–14 to become *sāmaṇeras* or novices and forty-nine foreign men and one Myanmar to take the full *upasampada* ordination. They would remain in robes for about a week, in accordance with the Myanmar custom of temporary ordination. In that land it is considered essential for every Buddhist male to become a samanera as a boy and a bhikkhu as a man at least for some short period of his life, for the reason explained above and to earn a very high kind of merit, *puñña*. All those in this group who were to be ordained were meditation students of Mother Sayamagyi and Sayagyi U Chit Tin, direct disciples of the late Sayagyi U Ba Khin, renowned lay teacher of Vipassana meditation in Myanmar. They were associated with the International Meditation Centres in that tradition around the world, and the small original IMC, atop a low hill in suburban

Yangon's diplomatic area, was the focus for most of the activities.

The shaving of heads, preliminary to every ordination, was set up just outside the wall surrounding the Light of the Dhamma Pagoda at the Centre. About six life-long bhikkhus from the preceptor's monastery came to help shave the heads of the ordinands. Shaded from the hot afternoon sun by a permanent awning, the men doused their heads with water from plastic buckets, then the brown-haired Europeans, blond Americans, black- and grey-haired Asians and Australians sat on low stools. Two people, including the man's wife if she was available, held a piece of white cloth beneath the candidate's chin to catch the locks of hair as they fell from the blade. The bhikkhus swiftly used the straight razors the foreigners had imported, while guiding the movements of their assistants through gesture when they did not share a common language.

The men were meditating, on the parts of the body or the breath or the significance of ordaining. Well aware that this was the start of an important ceremony, everyone quietly reflected on its value. It took perhaps an hour before all were shorn. As a man's head was finished, he took a shower and changed into fresh clothes in preparation for the *pabbajjā* ('going forth,' the preliminary ordination)

ceremony which was to take place that evening in the Centre's Dhamma Hall. The organisers knew that the men would be hungry so they were given an early evening meal since they would not be able to eat again that day after they had taken the novice's Ten Precepts, the sixth of which requires abstaining from food after midday.

It had already been a long day of celebration and religious activity. Early in the morning the children in the group, four girls and seven boys, had been dressed as princesses and princes in gilt and silk costumes that included fanciful high crowns, sequined lungis with long trains for the girls, makeup and decorations imitating precious jewellery. The princes were going to become *sāmañeras*, novices, in the evening and the dressing up was part of the build up, so they would enjoy themselves and keep happy memories of the day. The royal attire also symbolised the renunciation of the princely life by the Bodhisatta Siddhattha—the future Buddha—when he went forth from the palace to find the way to liberation.

Before 8 am, the children were lifted up into the backs of small open pickup trucks and seated on upholstered chairs by the individuals from the Centre who had been assigned to be their foster parents for the day. The real parents, perhaps a bit nervous about how their children would behave, carried the bundle

of their sons' robes along with some small white orchids. It was a landmark event in the lives of these Western Buddhist families. The boys' trucks were adorned with tall golden umbrellas proclaiming the ordination procession to passers by. The rest of the group followed in cars and coaches. They moved at a stately pace through Yangon to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, where several hairs of the Buddha are enshrined. At the head of the motorcade a uniformed Myanmar band standing in a truck played the typical raucous music of the land and sang about the Great Renunciation. A dancer performed in the jerky bent knee and elbow style of Southeast Asia. This too was part of the traditional way to celebrate the boys' going forth.

The 130-strong group found the route up to Shwe Dagon, Myanmar's most revered Buddhist site, clear of other devotees. Single file, barefoot, contented and chatting a little, each carrying a purple orchid spray offering, they proceeded up the series of long escalators to the level of the walkway. This is situated perhaps halfway between ground level and the peak of the spire with the golden umbrella. The wide band is paved in marble and much of it is covered with pagodas, cetiyas, and sculptures, notably of the stylized lions who seem to be guardians of the sacred shrine. There were many bhikkhus and lay families at

the pagoda although it was not crowded. They showed mild curiosity about the large group of outsiders. The international contingent was dressed for the occasion in proper Myanmar attire, the men in plaid lungis and short white jackets, the women in heavy woven cotton lungis all of one pattern in various dark colours. The group was led by their teachers and the princes and princesses as it respectfully and mindfully circumambulated the golden dome. The atmosphere was informal and comfortable, the meditators appreciating the beauty and peace of the scene.

After a short meditation session in a side chamber, they left Shwe Dagon and drove to an audience with the fifteen leading sayādaws, renowned senior bhikkhus, who were in office by turns from among the country's State Sangha Mahā Nayakas, the Central Executive Body of the Sangha. The group had been allotted a narrow window in the busy schedules of the sayādaws, the Central Executive Body of the Sangha, to pay respects. The theras sat on chairs in the front of the room with an ornate shrine behind them, and were formally introduced in English to the meditators. The foreigners, the teachers and Myanmar hosts accompanying them all paid respects to the sayādaws by bowing with their foreheads to the floor. They then repeated "*Namo Tassa Bhagavato*" and other devotional

verses after the chief sayādaw.

The focus of events shifted to the meditation centre for the rest of the day. In the early afternoon there was an ear-boring ceremony for the four girls aged 5–13. Since the Order of bhikkhunīs (nuns) has died out and, according to Theravada orthodoxy, cannot be revived for lack of bhikkhunīs to ordain others, girls in Myanmar undergo this simple ritual, generally when a brother is becoming a sāmaṇera. At IMC's Dhamma Hall, there was some chanting as the girls sat proudly before the assembly in their slightly rumpled princess outfits. A Myanmar woman doctor put earrings in each girl's ears and they were free to change out of the fancy but inconvenient clothes. For the girls this was the conclusion of their ceremony.

The head shaving of boys and men followed as already described. After their supper, the men came into the Dhamma Hall, their skulls shining, where they were seated on the rugs in rows in age order, facing a line of senior sayādaws. They received a bundle of brown robes neatly rolled together and tied with the red cloth belt worn by Myanmar bhikkhus. Everyone else sat at the back of the hall meditating and observing the proceedings. The ceremony, which had been explained in advance, went on in a combination of Pali, Myanmar and English. Small groups of the sāmaṇeras-to-be offered their robes to

their preceptor, who accepted them; then they requested the robes back from him so they could go forth, and he returned the robes. Now they all changed out of their lay clothes into the robes. (The shirts and lungis were put in labelled bags to be washed and ironed by wives or female volunteers and returned at the time of disrobing.)

Most of these men (and one of the boys) had ordained previously, and many had done so several times. But they were all anxious to have another opportunity to practise the strict purity of a member of the Sangha in Myanmar, the land they cherished as the home of the pure Buddha Dhamma which they had been practicing, some for over twenty years. They each formally requested to be ordained as novices and then took the Ten Precepts from U Pandicca, their preceptor, and underwent a few other short formalities. They were given their bhikkhu names from a list considered appropriate for the day of the week of their birth. There was a short discourse of advice for the *sāmaṇeras* and the *sayādaws* chanted several *paritta suttas* (discourses of protection), for the well being of all. With that, the novitiation was complete.

Later in the evening there was the usual group meditation in the Dhamma Hall, with the new samaneras seated at the front, in order of seniority,

which in almost all cases was age. The boys formed the last row and behind them were laymen, two or three from abroad, the rest from Myanmar. Next came the foreign women who had also come for the two weeks at the Centre, about forty-five of them. Filling the back to capacity were Myanmar ladies. This formal meditation hour was repeated three times a day for the two weeks the foreigners were in Yangon.

The men's full ordination (*upasampadā*), their entry into the life of bhikkhus, took place on Sunday the 9th January. The upasampada had to be in a monastery, so with the sponsorship and help of the Myanmar Department of Religious Affairs, the ordinations took place at Kaba Aye. This complex had originally been constructed to accommodate thousands of members of the Buddhist Sangha who gathered in Myanmar from all over the world in the mid-1950s to recite and purify the Pali Canon at the Sixth Great Buddhist Council.

Because of the large number of people to undergo full ordination at the Kaba Aye ordination hall (*sīmā*), they were divided into morning and afternoon batches. The motorcade left IMC right after breakfast. The men and boys had been offered their first meal as samaneras in their dining room at the Centre. After the food had been placed on the low round tables and the samaneras had all sat on mats on the floor, upāsakas, while bowing, gently lifted each laden table

up several inches, symbolically offering the food to the novices in Myanmar fashion.

When they reached the Kaba Aye sīmā, shoes were left in the buses and the sāmaṇeras, followed by the laypeople, formed a procession from the gateway. The sīmā is a large circular structure surmounted by a small golden pagoda. The line was led by five Burmese men dressed in fantastic gilt deva costumes holding ten foot tall white cloth sunshades dangling with small metallic Bodhi leaves. The sayādaws, sāmaṇeras and lay meditators walked slowly up a red carpet runner on the broad flight of stairs, into the sīmā.

The interior is 150 feet in diameter with a truly colossal golden Buddha statue on a nearly fifteen foot high throne at the front. It is flanked slightly below by statues of the two Chief Disciples, the Elders Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna, paying respects among various devotional objects: a tasteful grand scale shrine. The ceiling must be thirty feet high, supported on six massive columns decorated with bands of mirror inlay. A frieze goes around the perimeter, level with the Buddha's throne, composed of some hundred bhikkhu statues, perhaps half life-size, seated in meditation. Screened doors open outside at equal intervals; thick carpets cover the floor for the comfort of all; low, movable, decorative section dividers

separate the Sangha from householders and men from women. The foreign women sat behind Mother Sayamagyi at the left and watched the proceedings while the sāmaṇeras were seated in the central section of the sīmā several metres away from and facing their preceptor and other sayādaws participating in the ordination ceremony. Laymen occupied another back section.

When everyone had settled in the proper place, the ceremony began. In groups of three, starting with the eldest sāmaṇeras, the foreigners approached the elder monks to seek full ordination. From the remote viewpoint of the lay people, it was difficult to understand everything that was going on, but following details was not essential as they were there to witness the event and share in the making of good kamma. The samaneras could understand as they had been trained beforehand. They were being asked the questions put to prospective bhikkhus ever since the Sangha became fully organised in the Buddha's lifetime: about their health, their sex, whether they were free and not in debt, if they were really human beings, etc. They replied appropriately. When they had all completed the answers, the groups again went up to the theras to request full ordination. When they had been accepted into the Order, each trio moved to join the Myanmar lifetime bhikkhus seated just to the

side of the sayādaws conducting the proceedings. At times permanent bhikkhus had to bodily manipulate the foreigners into their proper places because they could not communicate through the language barrier.

The afternoon proceedings were similar except that a large number of outsiders also came to the *sīmā* to participate in the meritorious actions of supporting an ordination and of giving alms to the new monks afterwards. The atmosphere was quite special, generated by the commitment the men were making to the pure Buddha Dhamma and by the intention of everyone in the crowd to create *kusala*, good deeds, by participating in the proceedings.

The Deputy Minister for Religious Affairs spent several hours observing the ordinations and the Minister himself came to lead off the offering of *dāna* to the newly ordained monks outside the *sīmā* in the late afternoon. The general public too was welcome to participate in these activities. Many who had just read about it in the newspaper came, having bought some small item to donate, or put some cash into an envelope to give (the standard way around the fact that monks are not supposed to touch gold or silver, i.e. money). All the International Meditation Centres (Yangon, U.K., U.S.A, Austria, and Western and Eastern Australia) had their own tables loaded with a particular item to be given to the monks. These had

been purchased in Myanmar out of funds donated by members of the centres. Also various associations of the city participated in this dāna; Yangon University lecturers, for example, came together. In all, many hundred laypeople lined the path from the ordination hall to the street, standing and waiting in the hot sunshine, or patches of shade.

Inside the building, the bhikkhus were grouped by nationality behind labelled placards carried by young men. Each monk had a Myanmar layman bearing a tall white sunshade behind him and two of them on each side. These pairs of upāsakas carried large white sacks. As dāna items piled up on the monks' bowls, they carefully placed them in the bags, making sure they did not touch the ground. All these male workers wore badges for identification.

The senior sayādaws emerged first and slowly filed through the crowd, looking neither right nor left but just before them, not acknowledging the laypeople making their donations into the big black lacquer almsbowls. The feeling in the area switched from anticipation to reverence for the Sangha, respect for this institution which protects and follows the Buddha's teachings to the full. As the newly ordained bhikkhus passed through the line of donors, they responded to this awe for the robes they were now honoured to wear, keenly aware of their obligation to

conduct themselves as proper monks. Only in this way would they be worthy of the respect they were being shown, not let down their teachers and hosts, and not disillusion the laity, who were so sincere in their honour.

The laypeople slipped off their shoes, picked up a packet from the table behind them, and with both hands, carefully placed it in the bowl of the monk as he passed in front of them. (The women took extra care not to touch or brush against any bhikkhu or his robes in the crowd.) The giving was done systematically, rotating through each small cluster so that every lay person had equal chance to earn merit. The alms-round right after monks have been ordained is considered sure to bring donors extra merit. The new bhikkhus looked radiantly pure, with their shaven heads, lowered eyes, and restrained demeanour.

The final event of this day was held from five to six in the evening in Moguk Hall nearby in the same Kaba Aye complex. Here about a thousand lay devotees, mostly local, sat on the floor while the sayādaws and the junior monks sat on chairs at the front of the room facing them. The golden shrine was behind the bhikkhus. They recited *Namo Tassa Bhagavato*, the Refuges and the Precepts after the head sayādaw of the Kaba Aye monastery, and then a libation

ceremony of pouring out water was held to symbolise sharing the merits made that day. This was invisible to most of the lay people but was held in the front of the hall using several sets of silver vessels.

A tired, happy serenity was felt at IMC afterwards, born of the knowledge that so much *kusala* had been generated by so many people that day.

For the remainder of the week of the ordination course, the new bhikkhus stayed at the meditation centre. They lived in their own dormitories at one end of the grounds, under the watchful eye of their assistant preceptor, the Venerable U Chanda Siri who had also helped in all the earlier ordinations organised by the IMCs. They made good use of their time in robes, free of worldly affairs, by meditating many hours a day—observing the breath to develop sharp samādhi and then applying the concentrated mind to the sensations rising and vanishing in their bodies to penetrate the anicca (impermanent)—and so *dukkha* (unsatisfactory) and *anattā* (impersonal)—nature of mind and body as deeply as they could. All was done as taught in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin, in strict accordance with the teachings of the Buddha.

Every evening there was a confession also in the hall. As there were so many bhikkhus, U Chanda Siri heard the confessions of half of the men and one of the

older of the foreigners heard the confessions of the remainder. The bhikkhus got up from their seats on the floor, straightened their robes and worked their way to the front of the hall in pairs to recite the short Pali catechism admitting to miscellaneous errors and accepting admonition to try to do better in the future. In this orderly way it took about twenty minutes to finish all of the monks each evening. Sometimes the confession was followed by a short discourse by U Chanda Siri or one of the meditation teachers. One talk was about the '*dullabhas*', or states difficult to obtain, the most rare of which is being a bhikkhu. Another was an explanation of the origins of the questions the *sāmaṇeras* had to answer before being ordained as full bhikkhus. Those had been instituted by the Buddha in response to specific situations which arose, just as all the rules for the Sangha had been.

Following the bhikkhus' confession, the young samaneras came forward to recite the Refuges, Ten Precepts, etc., after U Chanda Siri. He was very particular that they pronounce each syllable in exactly the correct way, and they would repeat difficult words over and over until the result was as perfect as the preceptor wanted. The samaneras had their own bedroom and activities which included daily visits to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda.

The bhikkhus were fed in a separate upstairs dining

hall on choice Myanmar and Chinese vegetarian food. Often some special dish—such as ice cream—had been donated by someone. People were always looking for more ways to earn merit by helping the bhikkhus, and other meditators, at the Centre. The Myanmar Buddhists exhibit great generosity, cultivating the dāna pāramī.

The offerings the bhikkhus had received at the sīmā were sorted out by lay people one evening. The cash was totalled up and donated to certain pagodas and monasteries in Yangon, and the monks could take whatever they wanted of the remainder. Most of the things actually went out to vicars (monasteries) where lifetime bhikkhus would have more use for them than foreigners returning to lay life in their own countries in a few days.

The week as bhikkhus was interspersed with several events. One morning a piṇḍapāta (alms-round) was held at IMC itself. Monks from U Pandicca's monastery had come to wrap the temporary monks' robes in the complex way, modestly covering the neck and both shoulders, appropriate for 'going among the houses'. The line of donors wound around the pagoda and Dhamma Hall. This time most of the items were food, since it was before noon. The atmosphere was more like a community event since the Centre was 'home' to all the participants. The lay people again

were dressed in fine Myanmar clothes to honour the bhikkhus.

One afternoon, Myanmar TV conducted interviews with six of the bhikkhus, and two of the foreign laywomen, in the Dhamma Hall. (Actually, TV crews, local and Japanese, had been covering most of the events of the ordination week and everyone was familiar with bright lights—from external sources—while they were meditating in the Dhamma Hall.) The questionnaire which had been given to the interviewees was quite serious and the bhikkhus especially had a good opportunity to express their views on the situation of Buddha Dhamma in the West and in Myanmar and about what they had personally gained from practising this meditation. If the interviews were shown in full, some profound Buddha Dhamma would have come over that most unlikely of media.

The boys took off their robes on Saturday the 15th; the bhikkhus did so precisely a week after the ordination. On that Sunday afternoon the confession was held early, at four, and immediately afterwards they agreed aloud that they were prepared to return to lay life. They then requested to be regarded as samaneras. They removed the robes and changed back into their lay clothes and then asked to be recognised as laymen again—in both Pali and English. Finally U

Chanda Siri gave them a discourse as laymen, urging them to cooperate in spreading the Buddha Dhamma in their own countries and always to follow the advice of Mother Sayamagi and their other teachers.

The temporary bhikkhus returned to lay life with satisfaction at having done what is so hard to do: to be a good Buddhist monk. They were glad to have had even that short chance to know life without the entanglements, the 'dust' as the Buddha called it, of household affairs. Some of them were a bit sorry at its ending. Most will probably try to take ordination again in this lifetime to earn still more merit. Their families were joyous to see how they had matured from the experience. Everyone had the assurance that comes from the performance of meritorious deeds dedicated towards purification of mind and the attainment of Nibbāna, the cessation of all suffering.

Table of Contents

Title page	2
A Taste of the Holy Life	4